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ABSTRACT

While tenure-track faculty begin their careers with some sense of what they will teach, what they will earn, and how they will be promoted, lecturers are not allowed such assurances. In the early days, lecturers in the English Department at the University of Nevada Reno (UNR) taught basic composition courses, four per semester unless they were doing something else in the way of service. Now the teaching load varies. Many faculty members, ignoring the fact that most lecturers have gotten good at teaching writing, expect them to jump at a chance to teach literature. Whereas lecturers used to be evaluated primarily in teaching, now they are expected to publish. Lecturers' lack of certainty about their positions is exacerbated by promises of more equitable pay (current average is 20K a year), but as yet the money has not arrived. This uncertainty and inequity could be eliminated by development of a tenure procedure for lecturers. Tenure would not preclude the stipulation that a lecturer's primary task is teaching, not research. It would change nothing but the unfairness of the present system. (SAM)

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"Problems in Lectureships
at the University of Nevada, Reno."
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Nearly 15 years ago, the English department at UNR decided to convert most of its temporary positions into lectureships. Back then, the university did not fund those positions with hard money and the department did not carve its expectations in stone, so that no one knew very much in advance how lecturers were to be paid, how evaluated, or which courses we would teach, exactly, or how many per year. Each lecturer would teach, mostly in the freshman composition program, such as it was, and each would receive medical and retirement benefits. That was all anyone could say.

From the beginning, then, uncertainty has characterized our positions and our composition program. Matters have improved for us, certainly, and the program has more direction and substance now than in the past. Still, all is not well with us. A little history at this point may prove instructive.

Tenure track faculty begin their careers with some sense of what they will teach, what they will earn, and how they will be promoted. The system they work in promotes a sense of fairness and a reasonable hope for professional growth. We lecturers have had little enough of this. In the early days, we taught basic composition courses, four per semester unless we were doing something else in the way of service. An agreement to release each of us from one class per year was put into practice,but after one year the arrangement evaporated and four courses per semester became the standard load, unless we were doing something else in the way of service. No one knew just what that might be. When convenient or agreeable the administration connived at lapses from the 4/4 scheme. Increasingly the dept. finds it useful to assign us all sorts of literature courses, mostly at the undergraduate level, but not exclusively. Recently, some of us have begun to administer parts of a newly vitalized writing program, but college support for this has been slow, not to say costive, since this necessitates definite releases from the 4/4 load and waffling on this matter persists. Still, some of us teach a 3/3 load now, some 4/4, some might get a 2/3 load. A load of what, you might ask? Who knows? I was not scheduled to teach a composition course at all next year until I requested one in the fall. I will teach 304, a class in American culture and ideas. I've never done this, but the dept. needs to offer lots of sections of 304 because that course is widely required in our college. Some of my colleagues expect us to leap at such chances to escape composition courses, not realizing that we have gotten good at teaching writing, that what they did for a couple years in grad school we have done for a decade and more, that we even like it. This is generally reflected in our annual evaluations.

Back in the early days of lectureships, we were evaluated primarily in teaching. Someone soon enough added a service component to our job descriptions which one chap on the personnel committee called sweeping up. We were advised to do lots of sweeping up. A few years ago, someone suggested that lecturers, who were getting merit, in suitably diminutive portions, should

also publish, in a suitably diminished manner, so we were also evaluated in professional development. This could take many forms, none of them specified exactly, but we would not be given any releases to pursue this development. So we've published poetry, journalism, academic articles, a book or two, whatever. Merit might or might not follow such publication. It hasn't always. If our service is outstanding, we might get merit. We might not, since neither rule nor reason governs this part of our lives.

The history of our pay, at least, is straitforward; it's always been low. Back in the beginning, lecturers were to be paid sort of like lucky grad students. The salary initially proposed was so low that the state retirement fund wouldn't accept its proportional contribution. Someone found out what they would take and adjustments and fiddling got us up to 14k a year, a figure that made us the envy of busboys all over Reno. In 1988, a few curious lecturers discovered that we were paid less than other lecturers on campus, and the dean of arts and science allowed as how we might deserve an adjustment, which came the next year, and got us to within small change of a 20k per year base salary. You won't be surprised to find that women have held most of these plums, that women lecturers have made less than their male counterparts in some departments, and so on. Inequities so common as this don't often merit a remedy. Last year the university did notice that lecturers in my department weren't being promoted to steps within the zero rank, as they were in other departments. So we were all given two promotions and promised the usual salary adjustments that go with promotion. We actually submitted vitas to justify all of this, and a college committee seconded all promotions, but the money hasn't all arrived yet. The promises have. Just not the money.

All of this confusion is tolerable, and the uncertainty is even amusing sometimes, but in truth we are vulnerable in some most uncomical ways. For example, not long ago, a department chair used a handful of student evaluations against one of us and nearly got the lecturer dismissed from his position. A pro forma review by a college committee rubber-stamped the chair's decision, the president's office notified the victim that he had a year to shape up or be gone, and if not for the intervention of an NEA representative, the lecturer would have been fired. In fact, the chair admitted when questioned by the representative that she had a wobbly case against the lecturer, based in large part on things she had heard around the department. Could a tenured faculty member be rousted that way?

Take the more recent case of two lecturers who completed a three year probation. They taught so well that their students rated them invidiously high, they wrote articles and short fiction, they served the department like golem, and we found them excellent or highly commendable (I said they were rated invidiously high). We retained them in a unanimous vote, but trouble appeared at the college promotions level. I have tried to find out what objections were raised, but no precise account was to be had. The dean of A and S did, precisely, require the two lecturers to complete a second three year probation. Why? There was some muttering around

the department about our lax standards and some grumbling elsewhere about too brief a probationary period, but all this invertebrate wriggling failed to indicate a specific problem. The rules changed. So what?

Most recently, all of the lecturers have been reminded how precarious our arrangements with the university are. The board of regents found our wrap-around contracts inconvenient, largely because someone somewhere in the system has a five-year wrap. I think he teaches golf. I don't know what he's done to attract administrative menace, but I do know that to get at him some regents would cancel every wrap-around contract at the university. Fortunately, one of our colleagues has defended us and tried to explain that we have academic positions, and ought to be given some security in our employment. The regents have delayed action until later this year.

All this uncertainty taxes a relation. As Wendell Berry has noted in Home Economics, "Apparently it is in the nature of all human relationships to aspire to be permanent. To propose temporarinefss as a goal in such relationships is to bring them under the rule of aims that prevent them from beginning. Neither marriage, nor kinship, nor friendship, nor neighborhood can exist with a life expectancy that is merely convenient." The department and its lecturers have cohabited for over a decade, and it's time now to solemnize our long affair. We want tenure. Committee G's report, reprinted in the Nov Dec. Academe, argues for granting tenure to people in positions similar or identical to ours.

Not everyone favors this. Some people, full professors or those still filling up for example, have objected that such a move would violate, well, decorum. The same Academe mentioned above carries the remarks of one Thomas Farrell, who feels it would be "fatuous to argue that people who have only master's degrees and who do no scholarly research should be given the same status as those who have ph.d's and who do." Farrell does advocate a "measure of job security" for us down here in the lower status. What measure sir? Why not tenure? CC instructors in my university system can and do receive tenure. Many of them do no research, and some have only m.a.'s. None of this has threatened anyone's status or injured, fatally, anyone's vanity. Rather, tenure has justly rewarded people who devote themselves to a profession, the same profession Farrell is in, the same profession we follow. While no panacea, tenure would help secure our positions, and likely foster equity in pay and treatment generally. It would also curtail the unprofessionalism of chairs, deans, and others who would attack or exploit the vulnerable. Tenure would not preclude a stipulation that our primary task is teaching, not research. We could still be relied upon to ease crises in staffing. Nothing would change really but the unfairness of the present system.